La. Suspect In JFK 'Plot' Found Dead

Pilot Had Just Talked for 4 Hrs. To Post Reporter

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By George Lardner Jr.

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NEW ORLEANS, La., Feb. 22—A pilot who figured in District Attorney Jim Garrison's investigation of President Kennedy's assassination was found dead in his bed today.

David W. Ferrie, once interrogated as an alleged "getaway pilot" for a presidential assassin, was discovered at 11 a.m. with a sheet pulled up to his chest. New Orleans authorities are in disagreement over the cause of death.

Orleans Parish Coroner Dr. Nicholas J. Chetta said Ferrie died of a ruptured blood vessel at the base of the brain. Garrison called it an apparent suicide.

Interviewed by Reporter

I may have been the last person to see him alive, during a four-hour conversation that ended shortly before 4 a.m. today.

"A President," he told me at one point in a rambling interview, "is no better than anyone else. If I were killed, I'd expect my death to be investigated just as thoroughly."

It was almost as if he went back upstairs, after I left, to prove the point.

Arrest Expected

Garrison declared that his investigators had intended to arrest Ferrie next week in the District Attorney's highly publicized investigation of the death of President Kennedy. Garrison has asserted that Kennedy's death in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, was the product of a plot hatched in New Orleans.

Garrison called Ferrie "one of history's most important individuals."

"Evidence developed by our office had long since confirmed that he was involved in events culminating in the assassination of President Kennedy," the District Attorney said. He said that he decided only this morning to hold off Ferrie's arrest another week.

"Apparently we waited too long," Garrison said. He refused to spell out the charges

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that might have been lodged against the pilot.

Ferrie told me he felt convinced there was no plot to kill the President, that Lee Harvey Oswald was "a loner."

A loner himself, Ferrie seemed in good spirits, not like a man about to kill himself.

"Kennedy is dead," he said. "Let's get on with living."

But he also described himself as moody, even given to "manic-depressive" moods.

A brown bottle of medicine, tablets apparently, was standing on the worndown piano in his living room when I left. District Attorney Garrison said 14 other bottles were found scattered around the house. Ferrie was reportedly suffering from emphysema.

It was Ferrie who forced Garrison to acknowledge Saturday that he was conducting a full-scale investigation of what the District Attorney called a conspiracy resulting in the Kennedy assassination.

Ferrie told me he was convinced it would turn out to be a "witch hunt."

"This is not a city prone to knowing what it's doing before it arrests people," he said.

Ferrie, a ruddy-faced man in his late 40s, wore a shaggy, red toupee and had false eyebrows. An explosion several years ago cost him his hair and eyebrows.

He had been summoned by Garrison's men last November on broadly the same grounds for which he had been picked up within 72 hours after Kennedy's assassination.

Then he had been arrested as a "fugitive from Texas" and questioned about reports that he might have been in Dallas that sunny afternoon, waiting at Love Field with a plane to fly Oswald to safety.

Ferrie said he was sitting on a courthouse bench outside a Federal district courtroom in New Orleans, "shooting the bull with a couple of Federal agents" until a case he had been working on—Ferrie also worked as a private investigator—was completed at 3:20 p.m. that day.

"There wasn't even any charge against me in Texas to flee from," he said.

Ferrie said he did leave for Texas on a trip with several acquaintances after leaving the courthouse but that he went to Galveston and Houston "hunting geese," and never set foot in Dallas.

Ferrie said he never knew Oswald and had no recollection of ever having met him. Oswald was rumored to have served in Ferrie's civil air patrol unit in New Orleans, but Ferrie said they were in different units.

Ferrie was also rumored to have flown Oswald to Cuba around 1959. He scoffed at the report.

"I've never even been to Cuba," he said. "At the time I was supposed to be flying Oswald to Cuba, I understand he was in the Marine Corps."

Ferrie said he considered "this pre-occupation" with the Kennedy assassination "ghoulish." But his rooms showed that it occupied him day and night.

Copies of magazine articles on the President's death, books attacking the Warren Commission, even his own mathematical calculations of the path of the assassin's bullets, cluttered the floor.

On Tuesday, he said, he had been at the public library reading the Warren Report.

He had also been conducting his own investigation to counter Garrison's.

On Monday, he had turned up at a restaurant near Canal Street to talk to Carlos Bringuier, a Cuban exile who had scuffled with Oswald three years ago on a New Orleans street corner over Oswald's distribution of Fair Play for Cuba leaflets.

Bringuier, who insists that the assassination was a pro-Castro conspiracy, recalled Ferrie's visit with distaste.

"He asked me if I could help him," Bringuier said. "He told me that anyone who thinks there could be a Communist

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Associated Press

Police and newsmen gather outside the house where David W. Ferris died.

plot behind the Kennedy assassination should go to a pyschiatrist."

Pulling out a paper napkin as he was sitting in his store, the Casa Cuba, Bringuier read off the questions Ferrie had asked of him:

"One. Any Americans or any Cubans that Oswald had any association with in New Orleans.

"Two. If there is a conspiracy, when it started, the dates."

Bringuier, who went on the speaking circuit after the assassination with a right-wing organization, shrugged.

"There was a plot," he insisted, adding that he disagreed with District Attorney Garrison's declaration earlier in the week that a foreign power was not involved.

In his apartment shortly before he died, Ferrie explained the investigation by saying, "I'm just curious." He said he did not trust the courts or Garrison's investigation.

In the interview Ferrie gave his assent to the quotation of only a few of his ramarks. His death seems to remove the restriction.

Ferrie said he was especially worried that what he said might trigger a "premature arrest by Garrison's men." The District Attorney "knows he's got a tiger by the tail," Ferrie said, referring to himself.

A man of parts, Ferrie said he was fluent in several languages, trained in psychology and medicine and showed the assimilation of many of the 3000 books he had scattered through his rooms.

He said he was sure that the FBI had investigated Oswald's actitives in New Orleans thoroughly and was now waiting for Garrison to fall on his face. The District Attorney earlier in the week had said that "arrests will be made, convictions . . . obtained."

At the press conference after Ferrie's death, Garrison expressed his regret and suggested that the press may have driven Ferrie to take his own life.

"When you investigate somebody," the District Attorney said, "you feel like you get to know him."

Garrison said his men had been keeping "a continuous stakeout" around Ferrie's apartment at 3330 Louisianna Avenue Parkway "for a long period."

He said the stakeout as well as information gathered elsewhere "had caused us to become increasingly concerned, as our investigation progressed, about the possibility of his killing himself.

"We saw signs of extreme nervousness, endless pacing of the floor, comments to individuals in the last week or two relative to killing himself," Garrison said.

"At one point," the District Attorney said, one unidentified newsman to whom Ferrie had declined to talk, shouted, " 'You may as well talk to us now. You're going to be arrested in a matter of days.' "

The District Attorney said his office even put up Ferrie in a motel earlier this week, "at Ferrie's request," to give him some rest.

"We feel we knew him better than anyone else in the world," Garrison said. "There's no question about the fact it's a suicide."

But pressed on whether he was ruling out murder, Garrison told reporters, "I'm not ruling anything out. I don't want to be in the position of being dogmatic."

Ferrie's body was found by a man police refused to identify. Garrison said the individual had to break into the house to make the discovery.

The District Attorney also vowed to continue at full speed with his investigation of the Kennedy assassination. He said he had no intention of calling in the FBI. "What would be the purpose in seeking Federal aid—to try and delay our progress three more years?" Garrison demanded.

"We've been able to make more progress in three months with a handful of men than they've been able to do in three years with 5000 men," he said.

Garrison insisted that he wasn't trying to play "the dog that has to have its own bone" and added: "Any information the Federal Government has to give, of course we're glad to get."

But he professed unhappiness with what he said was the secret classification stamped on 36 out of 40 pages of the Warren Commisison volumes referring to Ferrie. He said the FBI had stamped them secret and he implied that J. Edgar Hoover's men had been less than cooperative in other areas of the investigation as well.